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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/28/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA ARRESTS RUSSIANS FOR SPYING, PLANNING
PROVOCATION

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b) & (d).

Summary

1. (S/NF) The Georgian government announced the arrests of four Russians and eleven Georgians on September 27, in connection with an alleged espionage ring. One Russian suspect remains inside a diplomatically protected Russian military building in Tbilisi. The Georgians tell us the arrests are the result of a careful, long-term counterintelligence operation, with substantial filmed evidence of transactions and other proof. They have accused one Russian suspect of involvement in a deadly 2005 bombing in Gori, and publicly suggested the group was planning another "serious provocation." End Summary.

Georgians Move In

2. (C) The Georgian government gave the Embassy advance warning on the evening of September 27 that they were about to arrest individuals they allege are Russian military intelligence (GRU) agents involved in espionage in Georgia. Shortly thereafter, the press reported that Georgian police had surrounded a Russian building in Tbilisi -- the headquarters of the Russian Forces in the Transcaucasus (GRVZ) -- to apprehend one Russian suspect who had apparently taken refuge there. Post was informed that four Russians and twelve Georgians were arrested in connection with the case, and the Georgians were attempting to negotiate the surrender of one Russian remaining in the building.

3. (U) In a news conference late September 27, Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili publicly confirmed this information and provided additional detail. He announced that four Russian GRU operatives had been taken into custody, GRU Colonel Aleksandr Sava and Dmitry Kazantsev, both arrested in Tbilisi, and Aleksandr Zavgorodny and Aleksandr Baranov, arrested in Batumi. He said eleven Georgian citizens had also been arrested for cooperating with the GRU to conduct espionage, collecting information on such matters as Georgia's armed forces, NATO integration, energy security, opposition parties, and Georgian troops in the conflict zones. Merabishvili said the arrests were prompted by information that the group was planning a "serious provocation." He said the alleged ringleader of the group -- one Anatoly Sinitsin working from Yerevan -- was the mastermind of a bombing in Gori on February 1, 2005 that killed three Georgian police officers.

4. (SBU) Merabishvili said another GRU officer, Konstantin Piguchin, was sought by the Georgians and believed to be inside the GRVZ building. He said Georgian police could not enter the building because it was protected by diplomatic immunity, but they were demanding that Piguchin be turned

over. He said the Georgians were also looking for one additional Georgian suspect. On the night of September 27, the Ambassador observed a police cordon around the GRVZ building, although the level of tension did not seem to be elevated. Piguchin was believed to still be inside on the morning of September 28. The Russian MFA issued a statement claiming that the four arrested Russians were in charge of the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Akhalkalaki and Batumi bases. The statement called their arrest groundless and "one more outrageous attack" by Georgia.

Product of a Long Investigation

¶5. (S/NF) The Georgian government has informed us that it has film and recordings of the GRU officers meeting the Georgian agents and exchanging documents and money. We understand the arrests were triggered by the unexpected decision of the senior GRU officer to depart Tbilisi; the Georgians feared that if allowed to depart he would not return. The GOG has told us that there were no "big fish" among the Georgians arrested; some were retired MOD officials and others were employed at the bases. The Georgians report that none of the arrested Russians have diplomatic immunity, and add that they have provided the Russian Embassy the required consular access.

TEFFT